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Citation

Brinkman, Bartholomew, "NEH Summer Stipend Grant Proposal Brinkman" (2015). *Grants*. Paper 3.
<http://digitalcommons.framingham.edu/grants/3>

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“By Clashes Quick and Sure”: Text Mining Magazine Poetry of the First World War

The centenary of the First World War (1914–1918) provides an important opportunity to reflect on the diverse experiences and lasting effects of war, felt both by soldiers in the trenches and by those on the home front. As suggested by the announcement of the NEH special initiative *Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War*, the humanities are particularly well positioned to facilitate such reflection. Of the various ways that the humanities might address the horrors of war, studies of poetry in particular encourage a foregrounding of emotional response, attention to possibilities for individual and collective action, and the often-felt need to gather particular experiences into more general, metaphorical significance that helps us better understand our war-torn past and provides lessons for dealing with the aftermath of more recent conflicts.

I am applying for a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend in order to devote June and July 2016 to full-time research and writing about World War I poetry, free from teaching responsibilities and other paid duties that I would otherwise need to undertake. In particular, I will use such digital humanities techniques as topic modeling and text mining to locate and examine poems in modern magazines, investigating how such examples highlight specific war experiences and contribute to defining the genre of the modern war poem more generally. This research will result in an article that I will submit for publication in fall 2016. It will also form the basis of my second book, which focuses on digital humanities approaches to studying a wide range of modern poetry. Moreover, research results will be disseminated to the general public through the Modern American Poetry Site.

Research and Contribution

My proposed research will make significant contributions both to humanities scholars and to the general public. First, it aims to complicate the ways that literary critics understand modern poetry and its relationship to war. While such critics have long grappled with such war-influenced poems as T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or poems by such soldiers as Rupert Brooke, who fought and died in the trenches, they have largely failed to consider the shared images, themes, and use of figurative language that might constitute the genre of the modern war poem more generally (or subsets of the genre, such as the poem depicting soldiers at war and the poem depicting women on the home front). They have also been insufficiently inattentive to the immediate historical moment in which these poems were written and read.

One fruitful venue for exploring the full spectrum of such poetry within its historical context is the modern magazine. The rise of modern periodical studies has drawn attention to the complex ways in which periodicals helped shape and disseminate modernism, and my research will further this study in investigating the role that such magazines played in the forging of a national war consciousness, frequently crystallized both in well-known poems and in the verses of many other writers who have often escaped critical attention. In doing so, I will consider which poets (marked by such things as race, class, gender, aesthetic assumptions, and political affiliation) tended to write war poetry; what subjects, events, and forms were commonly chosen; and if certain kinds of poems tended to appear in particular magazines. I am interested here in individual poems and poets, and also in uncovering the contours of the modern war-poem genre that might be distinguished through a common set of words and images.

Because I am interested in “distantly reading” the modern war-poem genre across hundreds of poems and thousands of pages, I am employing digital techniques to better locate and understand these poems in the aggregate, which then will direct my attention toward particular poems that demand closer reading. In doing so, however, I am also mindful of the ways in which I might productively interrogate common techniques and contribute to ongoing conversations in the digital humanities. For example, topic modeling seeks to generate statistical “topics” (clusters of co-occurring words) that help reveal the

dominant discourses from which a text has been created. While this works quite well with literal language, I am interested in how figurative language—a staple of poetry—disrupts this process. Similarly, I am also interested in furthering the ways in which text mining can be attentive to such issues as poetic form that in poetry is often highly allusive and a key dimension of meaning.

Finally, my research appeals more generally to members of the general public—including recent veterans and their families—who may be less familiar with poetry, modernism, and the digital humanities, but who are intensely interested in the history of war experiences and the ways in which prior depictions of war might remain relevant today.

Methods and Work Plan

I have begun research on war poems in modern periodicals by examining the runs of six modern American magazines, from 1910 through the end of 1922, made available through the Modernist Journals Project (www.modjourn.org). Three of these—*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Others*, and *The Little Review*—are what would traditionally be considered “little magazines,” dedicated to literary and cultural modernism and aimed at a limited readership. I have also looked at three more widely circulating magazines that regularly published poetry: the NAACP-published magazine *The Crisis*, the Leftist magazine *Masses*, and the middle-class magazine *Scribner's*. Together, these magazines overview a wide cross-section of the modern American periodical field of production and reception and suggest the ways in which concerns over war might intersect with concerns over race, class, and gender.

For each of these magazines, I have downloaded the lightly-encoded XML files and (implementing some XSLT transformations that have allowed me to mark individual poems with their title and author elements) have created textual corpora using R statistical software. Using the MALLET topic modeling package for R, I have generated topic models for each of the magazine runs, focusing my attention on those topics that seem to be most related to war. I have isolated the top terms in each of these topics, compiling a set of words (such as “war,” “soldier,” “army,” “fire,” “front,” and “peace”) that I have used as the basis for text mining poems in these magazines, employing both the “tm” text mining package for R and specialized script that I have written to locate terms within their surrounding textual context. At this point, I have identified 163 World War I poems across 92 magazine issues, totaling approximately 5000 lines. Some of these are written by well-known modern poets, and some of these poets wrote multiple poems. For example, I have identified six poems by Louis Untermeyer, four poems by Carl Sandburg, and three poems by Wallace Stevens. Many of these poems, however, were written by relatively unknown poets who are generally not studied today. Nevertheless, in the aggregate these poems share many themes and poetic elements that help define the genre.

I plan to use the summer stipend period to extend this research. First, I will repeat the process above for the British magazines *The Egoist* and *The New Age*, the files of which I will have secured from the Modernist Journals Project. This will allow me to further consider the transatlantic dimension of the modern war poem. With a larger collection of poems, I will then more closely examine the similarities and differences across these war poems through the lenses of subject matter, imagery, and form. My initial findings suggest that we might begin to identify at least four types of war poem in the modern magazines: the poem focused directly on the war experience (such as life in the trenches and death in battle); poems centered on objects of war (such as guns); poems focused on women’s home front experience (including that of wives and mothers); and mourning poems (in general or in reference to named individuals, especially modern poets who died at war). During the stipend period, I will further confirm, complicate, and expand on these types. I will also further consider the extent to which poems are integrated into, or stand apart from, the other writing in magazine issues, such as literary criticism and reviews in little magazines, and news items in the more widely circulating periodicals. Relatedly, I will investigate how the presence of poetry might change over the course of the war and the run of the magazine.

Competencies, Skills, and Access

My scholarly expertise is in modern poetry, print culture, media studies, and digital humanities. My first book, *Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print* (accepted for inclusion in the Hopkins Studies in Modernism Series at Johns Hopkins University Press; winner of the 2014 Northeast MLA Annual Book Award for a first book manuscript) argues for the ways in which print-media collecting practices (typified by book collecting and scrapbooking) affected the production and dissemination of modern poetry. I have also written numerous articles and book chapters similarly focused on modern poetry and print/periodical culture. In this research I have been attentive to the ways in which literary scholars often tell a rather limited story of modern poetry that marginalizes many poets, subjects, distribution networks, and reading experiences. As I have come to realize, while scholars have certainly made strides to recover individual poets and to consider the ways in which great swaths of poets might be read together, it is only with the rise of digital tools and a culture of digital inquiry that we have the opportunity to do so in a reasonably systematic and comprehensive manner.

Recognizing their potential for field-changing research, I have over the past few years been training in digital humanities tools and methodologies. In particular, I have learned XML encoding, focusing on the Text Encoding Initiative guidelines. I have also learned related technologies, such as XSLT and XQuery, which has allowed me to effectively manipulate XML files. Over the past two years, I have focused my attention on bigger data approaches that might complement this close attention to the encoded text, learning topic modeling and text mining with R. Much of this has been self-taught, but I have taken advantage of formal opportunities for instruction, as when I participated in the spring 2015 “Programming for Humanists” semester-long online seminar, taught through Texas A&M University. I also regularly attend meetings, workshops, and symposia devoted to the digital humanities, in order to ensure that I am researching in accordance with best practices and the most recent technological innovations. I will have accessed from the Modernist Journals Project all the magazine files that I require to continue my research and do not anticipate needing further materials.

Final Product and Dissemination

I anticipate that my summer research will be distributed in three main ways. First, I will write a scholarly article on World War I poems in the modern magazines, which I will submit for review in fall 2016. Because I am arguing for the practice of reading across genre and periodical text, one possible journal candidate is *PMLA*, which has recently publicized a call for papers for a special topics issue on “Cultures of Reading” that closes in November 2016. I will also consider journals more specifically focused on twentieth-century literature—likely targeting those journals in which I have yet to publish.

Second, I expect that this research will form the basis of a chapter for my second book, which uses digital humanities approaches to argue for a much wider and more historically enmeshed understanding of modern poetry than scholars have generally acknowledged. By giving attention to both canonical poets and to a vastly understudied popular poetry, I argue that in both content and form poetry foregrounds a rapidly changing modernity increasingly marked by questions of gender, sexual, and racial identity, disputes over capital and labor, and an increasingly global consciousness. Such shifts in modern identity were frequently crystalized in, and precipitated by, such historical events as war and by World War I in particular. Indeed, one of the reasons that summer funding for 2016 is so crucial to my research agenda is that it will give me the opportunity for sustained attention to the theoretical, historical, and methodological questions that will drive the second book project as a whole.

Finally, I aim to make my research on the modern war poem available and accessible to the public at large. One of the ways I will accomplish this is to produce an exhibit focused on World War I and the modern war poem for the Modern American Poetry Site (www.ModernAmericanPoetry.org), which I co-edit with Cary Nelson. This exhibit will be aimed at the general public with particular emphasis on how this earlier period might help us to understand the impact of war today.